

TO:

Members of the Environment Committee

FROM:

Henry N. Talmage, Executive Director

DATE:

January 31, 2011

RE:

Testimony on HB #5202

I am writing to express the Connecticut Farmland Trust's support for HB #5202 "An Act Authorizing the Issuance of Bonds for Farmland Preservation".

The Connecticut Farmland Trust (CFT) is the state's only private, non-profit organization dedicated exclusively to the preservation of working farmland. We hold agricultural conservation easements on privately owned farms and assist farm families throughout the process of protecting their land. CFT is a member of the Working Lands Alliance coalition.

CFT wholeheartedly supports Section HB #5202 as it provides critical funds needed to purchase development rights on CT's best farmland. Since the inception of the Farmland Preservation Program in 1978 the Department of Agriculture has protected over 37,000 acres on over 280 farms. While there is still much to do to reach our goal of protecting 130,000 acres, we are making significant progress. In fact, 1,371 acres on 16 farms were protected in 2010. HB #5202 provides bond funds of \$10 million dollars for the next two years and will allow the program to continue to protect approximately 2,000 acres per year. The current lump-sum bond authorization will run out this summer and without the authorization of bond funds described in HB #5202, the momentum and progress made in protecting CT's farmland will come to screeching halt.

The residents of Connecticut recognize that protecting our precious farmland is important and we need to act quickly before more land falls out of production. CT continues to have one of the highest rates of farmland loss in the country. This is happening even while there is increased interest in healthy, local food. There is reason to be optimistic about the future of Connecticut agriculture and the great diversity of quality farm products that we produce and sell in our local

markets. Without land however, the farming economy cannot survive. According to a recent study published by the University of Connecticut, agriculture contributes \$3.5 billion to CT's economy. Farmland preservation is different than other forms of land protection in that it provides opportunities for rural businesses and jobs. In addition, loss of farmland to residential development means that schools, roads, and other services become a financial burden to the rural communities that cannot afford them. In short, protection of farmland makes economic sense.

The Department of Agriculture has proven to be very efficient in selecting and procuring development rights from our farmers. The farm community trusts the Department and its staff to be responsive and fair. As a result there are many farmers interested in selling their development rights to the state as long as there are funds available. There are federal matching funds available through the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service Farm and Ranchland Protection Program that CT can use to leverage our own investment.

In addition to the economic benefits of farmland preservation, the rural character of our state would change drastically if we were to lose our farms forever. Farms are an important reason why so many people want to visit and live in our beautiful state. Farms also provide important habitat for many species of plants and animals that make Connecticut special, including migratory birds.

Twenty, fifty, or even one hundred years from now the residents of Connecticut will look back at this time and recognize your vision and resolve to protect farmland for our future. HB #5202 is an important step in providing the critical funds for protecting farmland into Connecticut's future.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony.

Henry N. Talmage Connecticut Farmland Trust